

# MYSTERY IN MALAWI

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At first, I wasn't sure what it was, but it seemed as if the sound had been loud enough to wake me from deep sleep. With the vividness of larium laden dreams being what *they* are though, I was not even sure I had actually heard anything. As usual the windows to my bedroom were open wide with the glint of southern hemispheric constellations gleaming down through a cloudless, moonless night. A gentle African breeze made the white mosquito net draped about me waft gently in the night air both cooling and comforting at once.

Then, I heard it again. This time there was no mistaking it. It was real all right. It sounded like a door handle turning, possibly a key being gently tried – but I could not be sure. Suddenly, and just as abruptly as it had begun, it was over. There was nothing to be heard but a distant dog barking. Then, there was nothing at all.

Since arriving in Africa, it seems I have gone to bed each night made ready for sleep by a day long with physical effort and cerebral exertion. In short, always tired, always ready for bed. Emotionally, physically and mentally, I seem forever eager for the comfort and restorative therapy of deep sleep.

Some of this fatigue can be attributed to walking more in Malawi than I had previously been accustomed. Some of it no doubt is due to the continuous stream of novel circumstances, uncertain social boundary conditions, new challenges, and the resulting emotional toll exacted by day's end. Regardless as to the reason, with every receptor yearning to resume the resonance and soothing effect of alpha-wave output, I wanted only to roll over and go back to sleep.

Besides, I remember thinking; it was probably Ellen, my Mtapu Village housemate, up creeping about the house going to the bathroom or testing the front door. And in any case, Mr. O'Stein, our night watchman who was on duty and so, I buried my head back in to my pillow and returned to the depths of my welcomed tropical slumber.

By 5 AM I was awake as usual welcomed to this Friday morning by the cascading crows of nearby cocks and the quiet clucking of range roaming hens just outside my bedroom window. I performed my daily custom of light exercise, bible reading and prayers before going out to the front room. The timing of the conclusion of these morning rituals tends to coincide with the end of Mr. O'Stein's night watch or just before 6 AM.

We met at the front door to gather the torch, whistle, empty water bottle and drinking glass that we had furnished him the night before. I opened the door to see him standing there with these articles in his hands but before I could utter "*Mwazuka bwanj*" my morning greeting to him, he began, "*Madam, thieves come in the night.*"

Still waking up and not believing my ears, I asked him to repeat what he had said, "*Menenso pang ono, zikomo.*", I somehow managed.

He then repeated that thieves had come during the night and had dismantled the exterior to the front door lock and handle. Apparently, they had been run off before they could finish breaking in, yet in a bizarre twist had managed to abscond with both the door *handle* and the cover plate. Then when he finished, we just stood standing and staring wide-eyed at the place on the door where the apparatus we had seen so often before had been. Slowly it sunk in that our door handle and cover plate were clearly *all* that was missing.

Having already exhausted my Chichewa in this circumstance, I quickly resorted to questioning Mr. O'Stein in English, "Did you see them? Did you blow your whistle?? Did the constable come???", I asked each question formed with the rising inflection of my burgeoning disbelief.

"No." he said, "No see, Madam." His eyes shifting, "No whistle." And finally, staring a bore hole into the front porch's floor, he added, "Go tell constable now."

By this time, Ellen was up and joined us in complete amazement at what her eyes now were telling her. She burst into engaging Mr. O'Stein much to our relief but did so in her native Chichewa. I watched her face grow more astonished, her eyes opening more widely with every exchange. Finally, seeing that she had pretty much gotten to where we had been when she had arrived on the scene, I prompted Mr. O'Stein to go file his report with the constabulary that was not a half kilometer from where we stood.

Ellen and I both were naturally relieved that the thieves had been thwarted from doing any worse, from gaining access to the interior to our home, to our possessions, or worse still, to us. And so trying to shake off the 'willies' of what might have been, we attempted to wrap ourselves in the comfort of what remained of our familiar morning routines. Ellen began making her tea while I busied myself with my oats cereal with banana.

Our return to our customary activities however was short-lived. Fredrick Matengo, the local constable and one of his chief deputies arrived to inspect the scene of the crime, an event naturally requiring our attendance and full attention.

In Chichewa the word '*matengo*' means a large peaceful woodsy area not unlike a park. Matengo, whom I had met when our paths crossed a couple of weeks before this, had been a delight to behold. He had a pleasant enthusiasm for his work and displayed a well-deserved pride for the '*matengo*-like' mood of the college campus and small surrounding community.

This morning however, it was different. Matengo though still cordial, was full of the business at hand sobered by the stark crime scene which he now stood pondering directly. Standing with arms crossed, his right hand arched upward to hold his troubled grimace. His frowning face was angled in the direction of the missing elements and then his whole head began to move side to side in a combination of clear disbelief and stunned annoyance.

His visit was brief however, and after a few more perfunctory questions, Matengo excused himself to go to attend to duties elsewhere. Ours, it turned out, had not been the *only* home violated during the night and Matengo and his deputy had other sites still to inspect.

As they turned to leave, I tried to take notice of the new day now well under way. With the sun already having launched to full brightness, beautiful white puffs now were easily seen dotting the deep blue African sky. It was only then, as the two investigators continued walking away, that I noticed for the first time that neither the constable nor his deputy carried a sidearm.

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Ellen and I finished our morning rituals and ate breakfast just in time to greet Geoffrey Jackin (pronounced *Jackeen*). Geoffrey, hired originally as an 'occasional' helper around the house quickly has become one of our inner 'family circle. This day, Geoffrey was to assist in the matter of the flying mammals (belonging to the order of *chiroptera* [literally *bone*-winged]) that had taken to occupying our attic. These particular *chiroptera* and their many cousin-species are more commonly known here about as African bats.

Yes, large *African* bats! They had somehow managed to make *our* home *theirs*. And now these creatures of the night numbered *at least* in the dozens. Bad enough the spine-chilling imagery these flying mammals evoke, the rabies and other diseases they are said to carry, but being nocturnal as they are, these bats conducted their noisiest activities *after* dark disrupting numerous a night's sleep.

Because of the flapping of their large (30-40 cm [12-16 inch]) wings, move about and *squeal* before brushing against the wood of the ceiling just a meter or two away and the exterior roof on *every* departure and return, their presence had become a prominent part of our night time experience.

I had witnessed a particularly haunting sample of their comings and goings one evening from our living room window shortly after sunset. Pushing out from the apex of our roof, they would drop precipitously down for an instant toward the garden below before fluttering and flapping the full length of their wings to pull air between themselves and the dirt and then up and over the garden fence they would go. One after another after another they would appear, dive down and then would suddenly be swallowed up into the growing darkness.

Watching, simply amazed at their dark presence, their aerobatic adroitness, and their emergent and growing number, I had to pause not only to control my growing revulsion but to appreciate their uncanny aeronautic precision as well. One after another, like jet planes off the deck of some carrier in some far away ocean, they just headed into the wind, dove on out and down, dropping only momentarily before catching the night air with their wings and then propelling off, guided by the physics of sound and the hard-wiring packed into each of their tiny crania by its Maker. Each of them a mystery of flight and night not to mention the additional marvel of just how well *all* the parts of this wonderful universe seem to fit 'just so' with a craftsmanship simply not attainable by Boeing, Airbus or Lockheed Martin.

This day, Geoffrey was to put an end to all of this. At least, an end to it from *our* attic! Our plan was to have Geoffrey return that evening before sunset and then after waiting for the entire complement of bats to take their flight, and then to (somehow) plug up the hole in the attic. Then later upon their return, the bats would be frustrated by the presence of an immovable barrier and take their refuge elsewhere. At least, that is the way our plan would have it.

Whether this would actually work or not was less clear but we had reasoned at least that such a low cost, low risk try simply had to be given a go before anything else possibly more damaging to life (including the bat's), could be contemplated. Geoffrey thus went off to find the 'something' we were to use as our plug. I left to meet with Mr. Lazarus Thomu, director of the division of the college to which I am administratively assigned, to report the prior night's crime.

Perhaps because of the reassurances by Mr. O'Stein and Matengo or perhaps just because of the warmth and brightness of the tropical sun in the clean African air, I had not been given to worrying about the prior night's offense, which had by mid-morning been down-graded from attempted tropical break-in to a perfunctory petty thievery of 'door handles'.

But after completing my report to Mr. Thomu and later on still after discussing the episode with others associated with my mission here, I began recalling how while in Zimbabwe in 2001, the United States Peace Corps contingent to which I belonged had been exposed to a rash of what appeared to be only 'petty' criminal activities. These had included attempted break-ins, purse snatches and 'minor' assaults all of which had been similarly 'down-graded' by all concerned (self included) as unrelated and inconsequential transgressions. All in all they had been judged as certainly nothing with which to be concerned.

Later, these minor transgressions, misdemeanors and ‘petty crimes’ culminated in the murder of Larisa Jaffe and the subsequent evacuation from Zimbabwe of the entire Peace Corps group thereby shattering the peace and sanctity of Larisa’s life and home not to mention the tranquility of her surviving PCV friends and colleagues.

Suddenly confronted once more with the chilling recollection of these events, I became upset to the point of tearfulness. Feeling suddenly just *too* vulnerable and *too* easily distinguished against the backdrop of poverty against which all else happens here, I was suddenly frustrated with the placating patronization of everyone’s complacent reassurances.

Though the tears dried as quickly as they had welled up, I became angry. I don’t like fear and frustration one bit and I had suddenly been having just a little too much of both. At times like this, particularly when I become mindful of my own fear, I am inclined to seek sanctuary in my faith in God.

“*Fear not! Be not dismayed! For I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you*”, I quietly repeated. Quite candidly, faith has not always been the refuge it has become for me *these* days. But it is now, and so I turned to it fully aware that faith *would* chase this fear from me.



By noon as I was walking past the principal’s (‘*college president’s*’) office where I checked for my mail and to see about a meeting I was to have with the principal the following week about the multi-site PSI exhibitions here, I suddenly decided to walk down by the World Vision office, one of the reported sites of the prior night’s criminal activity. After introducing myself and exchanging greetings in my hesitant Chichewa with the man who answered the door, I asked about the prior night.

My eyes searching around for signs of a break-in, I saw that they were also missing the door-handle and cover plate from their front door. As the young gentleman continued his recounting of the prior night’s happening, I was simply astonished to discover that not one, but two night watchmen had been on duty at this location and that along with *my* night watchman then *three* men failed to see, hear, or respond to the larcenies of the prior evening.

My schedule being gratefully clear of obligations elsewhere that afternoon, I elected to remain at home to work on course preparations and a grant proposal I was developing for the college. I succeeded in engrossing myself in work and was well on the way to getting back to being my usual productive self while Ellen read and studied elsewhere in our small home. As usual for at least our side of the mountain, a gentle breeze lapped gently at our curtains. The cheerful sound of birds reassured and added to the healing comforts of our quiet work routines.

Later in the afternoon, a form four (*high school senior*) student dropped by for his English lesson with me. Not much later as the sun began to migrate down behind the near mountain range the college’s carpenter, a man named Sinoya, finally made his way to our house to effect repairs to our broken door. Sinoya is not a man of many words and so set about quickly to dig at the old wood and plug old screw-holes with wooden patches he fashioned from splinters right done right before my eyes.

I couldn’t help but admire his craftsmanship. Here we were in a developing country yet I stood watching a classic example of a skilled conservationist practicing good husbandry of his limited physical resources. This I conjectured was a great example of wood-working art that fell in to disuse when replacing damaged and worn parts became cheaper than paying skilled labor to repair it. I wondered how long it might be before this ‘lost art’ would once more

become standard practice owing to the scarcity of the precious natural resource thus reversing the economics of this practice - at least in the industrialized countries.

Working the wood in his practiced way, Sinoya soon had the new door handle, purchased just that afternoon, up and installed 'good as new'. I thanked him and he was off to fix another house's handle no doubt though the light of day was waning quickly.

Shortly after he left and with the sun just falling beneath the mountainous horizon, Geoffrey reappeared to begin our vigil of the bats' hide-away in the roof of our house. Because this is the worst time of the day for malaria prone mosquitoes, both Geoffrey and I rubbed on mosquito repellent that was especially strong in DEET, the CDC's recommended ingredient for this kind of thing. We then sat ourselves down on the edge of the porch where we had a good view of the bats' hole. Then, we just waited.

For a little while, we heard and saw nothing. But then, the engines began to start up on the deck of these bats' 'carrier' and the wing flapping and chirping could easily be heard. Soon afterward, the first bat emerged diving out in to the rapidly cooling evening air. Once twice the wings would beat and then up and over the fence they would go. Then others followed. 2 ... 3, then 12 ... 13, ... and then still more. Before all of the flapping and chirping had finally quit, Geoffrey and I counted sixty bats in all. *Sixty!*

Geoffrey climbed the latter quickly now eager to complete his task before any of the first departures had had their fill of insects and sought to return. He had with him some kind of black tarry substance that he assured me was 'clay' that he had all-balled up into one giant piece the size of a grapefruit he was to use to plug the hole. In short order, he affixed the ball into the opening and after examining and testing its placement came back down the ladder greeted by my words of gratitude.

*"This will work!"* He assured me. And sure enough, it did.

The bats returned throughout the evening alright but finding their way blocked they went on into the night to find final resting places unknown. *"No guns, no bats, no errors"*, I thought somehow turning an old *Johnny Bench* paint commercial on its silly head.

Geoffrey finally left still congratulating himself on such a masterful approach to pest removal when constable Matengo walked up to inspect the adequacy of the repairs done to our front door. I said hello to him and we talked a bit.

We agreed the door handle was well repaired and then he surveyed me, the only United States citizen under his protection. *"There were eight homes vandalized last evening, yours and seven others. The thieves were at least eight in number and they struck together all at the same time. They each had bunji knives."*

He paused to find the words, *"None of the night watchmen public or private blew their whistles."* His eyes searched mine for a response, for understanding.

I understood well enough. In addition to the watchman at our house and two at the World Vision office, there were at least two others hired by the college roaming the mountain side. The odds that none of these noticed *eight* simultaneous break-ins at the homes they were being paid to protect was infinitesimally small.

However, the likelihood that outnumbered and overpowered and facing the very real possibility of impending harm, the watchmen to a person had simply feared for their lives and stood aside while the thieves conducted their dark affair grew to the point of being probable.

Matengo, embarrassed by the sudden exposure of vulnerability his words had revealed, moved quickly to attempt some restoration. “*Police in Blantyre now suspect an Indian who has been operating in the general area for a while now, stealing door handles and melting them down to make coffin handles. They have just now worked their way around to our area it seems. Hopefully, he has enough now of what he needed.*”

Then, after an awkward moment during which neither of us spoke, he said good night and left. And me? I walked back into the house. Tonight as usual being the start of the Sabbath, the night watchman Mr. O’Stein had the night off. So, there would be no mortal to stand watch over us.

Despite the absence of watchmen, despite the audacious bravado of armed thieves in our midst, despite the sudden vulnerability of our tiny community to *anyone* similarly organized and armed, Ellen and I *fear not*. We *fear not*, not out of foolishness or neglect but out of faith.

There are no locks sufficient in number or strength to keep you from *all* the evils that can have their way *anywhere* really least of all in a place like developing Africa. So as we have been told, we *do* what we can about the mosquitoes and the snakes and the parasites and the water and the bats and the break-ins. But in the end, it is faith - *not* fear - that we choose to have distinguish our presence here. And so we are comforted by His omniscience in our lives and the safety of His almighty hands; . . . hands which never tire nor grow weary.

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